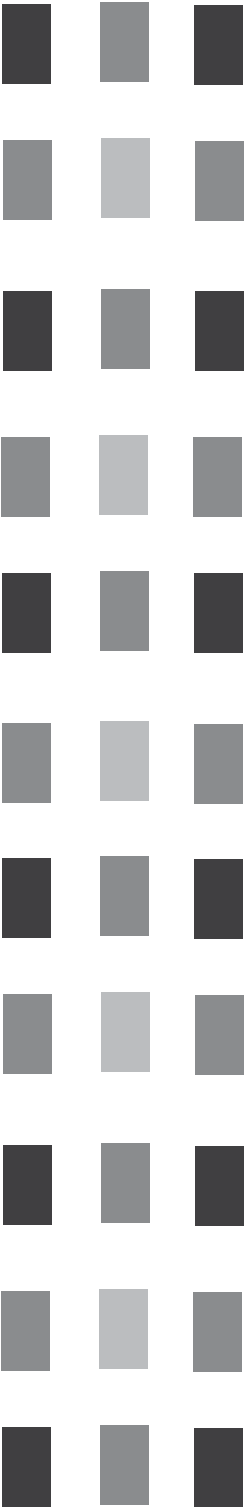


Medium Architecture

An Epistemological Perspective

George Baird



The "Concept Paper" circulated with your invitation to the 9th International Bauhaus Colloquium provoked me to attempt a somewhat presumptuous project: that is to attempt to formulate a comprehensive – albeit summary – contemporary theoretical perspective on the place of the architectural artifact 'in the world' today.

Following a lead in the argument of the concept paper, I begin with a consideration of the project of semiotics in architecture of the late 1960's and early 1970's. (I find myself supposing – given the theme of the colloquium – that my role in that project has been a factor in your invitation to me to participate.) For it is my view that the contemporary predicament of 'medium architecture' must be seen to have begun with the gradual – often even dismayed – realization on the part of architects in those years that the architectural 'signifier' had to be understood to be 'separated' from its 'signified'. Indeed, it seems to me that the reason the semiotic approach was so controversial was that it was the first theoretical position in architecture to make this troubling "separation" evident, as well as to demonstrate that – in a Saussurean sense – the operative relationship of the 'signifier' to the 'signified' is 'arbitrary'. This apparent 'cultural relativism' if you will, deeply distressed the last generation of orthodox modernists in architecture, since it fundamentally challenged their longstanding assumption of the inherent, affirmative meaningfulness of the modernist project.

In retrospect, it is important to remember that the theory of Saussurean semiotics exhibited three basic parameters. The relationship it posited between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' was only one of them. Equally important to the body of theory as a whole were the two further conceptual pairs: 'langue' and 'parole', and 'system' and 'syntax'. To me, it was the complex set of interpretations made possible by the matrix of all three conceptual pairs that made semiotics so interesting, and so potentially useful for architecture. But my hopes were not fulfilled. Instead, most of the theorists and practitioners of that era who pursued a 'semiotic' approach to design, increasingly emphasized the semantic relationship of the 'signifier' and the 'signified', as opposed to the other two pairs of concepts. And a direct historical consequence of this (especially in the Anglo-American world) was the phenomenon we have since come to know as Postmodern architecture.

As your concept paper also indicates, this tendency was eventually superseded by a Deconstructivist and 'critical' architecture that took its intellectual cue from a Derridian critique of structuralism. As your concept paper rather eloquently puts it: "'deconstruction' achieved the demotion of the simulations of meanings that

Postmodernism had been hatching as a born-again architecture parlante of the waning millennium".¹

For me, it is important to underscore the extent to which the triumph of deconstruction must also be described as an explicitly phenomenological counterattack on the precepts of structuralism. Deconstruction would not have had the potency it had – especially its critical potency – were it not for the fact that a Derridian phenomenology fueled it in a similar manner that semiotics – albeit a schematized semiotics – had fueled Postmodernism.

Not the least reason to underscore this opposition of phenomenology to structuralism is that it has had no historical parallel during the more recent further shift in architectural paradigms, from 'deconstruction' to 'virtual' architecture. Postmodernism took an adversarial position towards orthodox late modernism, and deconstruction in its turn opposed postmodernism. But 'virtual' architecture has simply evolved out of deconstruction, without any such equivalent polemical confrontation. And, as a result, it seems to me that the ideological content of 'virtual' architecture is much less clear than that of either of its predecessor tendencies. Indeed, I can go farther, and state my view that a lack of clarity characterizes the present moment in our discipline more generally.

Your concept paper seeks to clarify this moment by delineating three themes that are proposed as possible parameters of MediumArchitektur: These are first: "Space as Medium" followed by the subheading: "perceptive device and body technology"; second: "Language of Architecture; Architectural Discourse"; and third: "Virtual Architecture". I shall now comment briefly on each of them.

Regarding "Space as Medium", your paper observes that "architecture not only represents but constructs the social through the spatial". Not only do I agree with this statement; I would say that there may be an even more fundamental constitutive role for it than that. For architecture has always performed its constitutive role in society by means of its relation to the human body and to human experience – indeed, to what we know as 'the world', phenomenologically speaking. That this is so, is probably the primary lesson I have learned from my mentor Joseph Rykwert, who was also present at the Colloquium.

Now it is often the case in contemporary architectural discourse – in subtle distinction to the position of Rykwert – that the so-called "phenomenological" position is specifically associated with a certain tectonic minimalism, and an intense materiality. That this is so, is probably in substantial measure the work of Kenneth Frampton, whose interest in Heidegger has colored his view of architects such as Dimitri Pikionis and Tadao Ando. But a perspective we can call 'phenomenological' need

not be limited to such minimalist tectonics. I have been reminded of this by a reading of a recent book by one of Rykwert's students, Neil Leach. In *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*, Leach assumes a more aggressive posture than either Rykwert or Frampton, and mounts an unequivocal attack on a number of contemporary cultural phenomena, including Las Vegas, which he sees as a contemporary epitome of "inauthenticity".

As it happens, I have recently visited Las Vegas several times, and have been surprised to discover how much more complex a phenomenon it is than I expected it to be. I cannot dwell at any length on this complexity here, but let me note simply that my experience of this rapidly changing American city has given me considerable food for phenomenological thought. First of all, neither the 'semantic', nor the 'referential' characterizes the architecture of Las Vegas to the extent that it once did. Indeed, recent design work in Las Vegas has been moving away from the overwhelmingly 'referential' content that used to typify it, and towards something much more kinetic, and much more experiential. The new, and intensely lively pedestrian activity of the strip (fig. 1), and the fountains of Bellagio (fig. 2) are two striking instances of this new 'performativity'.

And while it is true that Rem Koolhaas' *Guggenheim Las Vegas* struggles mightily to dissociate

itself from the plaster kitsch of the Venetian hotel inside of which it is located, Las Vegas leading hotel/casino entrepreneur, Steve Wynn, with much less angst, has moved the imagery of new his hotels away from the kitch iconography of the old Las Vegas, and towards one that is much more restrained, and much more spatial. Even in the world capital of evident 'inauthenticity', I discovered to my surprise that many visitors will find it possible to have an 'authentic' experience.

Interestingly enough, your concept paper emphasizes the prosthetic, rather than the constitutive aspect of „space as medium“. You ask: "should we talk about (architecture) as a prosthesis, a means to reach out to and construct reality? Or else is architecture a sort of matrix or textured interface between the body and the world?"²

"Both" is my answer, and I would go on to speculate that design in such a regard may well be a main arena of innovation in 'virtual' architecture. Some of the most interesting experiments of designers such as Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio (such as their 1989 *Parasite* installation at the Museum of Modern Art) would seem to suggest this.

But for me, the 'medium architecture' you suggest 'virtual architecture' can in some senses be seen to be, and the 'architecture in the media' described in your quotation from Rem Koolhaas, are, in many cases, quite different from each other –



1 | Strip, Las Vegas

especially as regards the place of such architectures 'in the world'.

You quote Koolhaas as follows: "Given the fact that most architecture is now consumed through media and most architectural judgements are made in media and through media, it is a very plausible thing to say that the representation of the city in the media is now the most crucial event, much more than the real thing."³

This observation of the frequently wise Koolhaas strikes me as not only wrong, but dangerous. My reasoning is as follows: Much of the time, 'virtual architecture' has the capacity to expand our visceral sense of the relationship of our body to the world. Indeed, it is not hard to locate certain quasi 'virtual' conditions of experience in the architecture of Koolhaas himself. I myself found some of them in a recent visit to his Prada store in Soho in downtown Manhattan. The celebrated dressing rooms, for example, incorporate video images of customers trying on garments, by means of which they are assisted in their decision-making about purchases (I admit that this system of virtual self representation does not surpass that offered by the more traditional device of the mirror).

Much more potent a design element is the large, cylindrical elevator which links the first and the basement floors of the shop. Fully glazed, the elevator in question moves shoppers between the

two levels of the shop at the same time that it serves as a vitrine for the display of merchandise. Indeed, I discovered that simply using it to ascend or descent in the shop has the effect of turning the user into a mannequin. I can even go further still, and remark that my personal ascent in the Koolhaas elevator into the midst of a group of somewhat awed fellow shoppers on the upper level, prompted me to imagine myself re-living a "birth of Venus".

These then, are some of the potent current capacities of 'virtual architecture' and its physical analogues. 'Architecture in the media', on the other hand, usually has a problematic converse effect to 'virtual architecture'. That is to say, it tends to narrow the significance of any published version of a built artifact down to its pure semantic iconicity. Extensively published buildings that are located in non-metropolitan settings (such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain) are particularly apt instances of this syndrome. Do not misunderstand me. I do not suggest that Bilbao is not a real building in the real world. It surely is – and its designer – Gehry – remains enough of a materialist to have intended it to be so. But there is also a 'virtual' Bilbao, the product of media. Indeed, we can describe the gap between the "real" Bilbao and the 'virtual' one, as being one of the more consequential 'caesurae' extant in architecture today. I



2 | *Fountains of Bellagio, Las Vegas*

am surprised that few commentators to date have taken it upon themselves to note how similar this 'architecture in the media' is to the Postmodernist architecture of three decades ago, with its own, overwhelming, reductive emphasis on the semantic dimension of the signifier.

This having been said, let me insist that while architecture cannot ever afford to become a purely semantic medium, it has nonetheless always been a 'referential' discourse. Indeed, it is my view that even those architectures which seek not to be referential, will nevertheless turn out to be so, on account of architecture's ineluctable status as 'social construction', and its unavoidably labile semantic tendency. In your concept paper, you cite the example of the former World Trade Center in New York as an example of this. As if this were not interesting enough, we may also note how, in the interval of time between your circulation of your paper, and the Colloquium itself, we have all, involuntarily witnessed a parallel process of ideological semanticization overtake the winning submission to the competition for a plan to replace those buildings. Thus, it seems to me that this referential sense of the „Language of Architecture“ that your second concept paper theme refers to, continues to be more consequential than the related matter of international discourse about architecture to which you devote greater attention.

As I have already noted, it is my view that 'virtual architecture' and 'architecture in the media' should not be construed as interchangeable conceptions. In the most interesting cases that I know of, 'virtual architecture' engages the corporeality of the observer or the user, just as traditional architecture has always done. That is to say, the most interesting modalities of 'virtual architecture' are precisely those hybrid ones that mix and blur proximate and virtual relationships between bodies and buildings – in other words, that render virtuality prosthetic.

I wish to conclude this short paper by returning to the matter I cited at the beginning, the constitution of architectural reality 'in the world', in phenomenological terms. As a protagonist of the 'structuralist' project of semiotics who was personally bloodied in the phenomenological counter attack of the 1980's, and as a protégé and admirer of the same Joseph Rykwert cited above, I have had many an occasion in recent years on which to ponder the complex relations of 'structure' on the one hand, and 'hermeneutics' on the other, in the intellectual life of our era. As some of you will be aware, the chief intellectual influence on me in these matters has been the political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who was, of course, in her turn, a protégé of Martin Heidegger. Between 'structure' and 'hermeneutics' it seems to me, the critical question continues to be that of 'reification'

on'. This, of course, is the socio-political construct devised by Marx to characterize what he called „the fantastic form of a relation between things“. In the hands of his follower Georg Lukacs, "reification" was rendered, if anything, bleaker still, and was set in contrast to a radical organic immediacy in human affairs that Lukacs celebrated. Pupil of Heidegger that she was, Arendt was in her own time very cognizant of the controversy surrounding the concept of "reification". As she put it: „reification and materialization, without which no thought can become a tangible thing, is always paid for, and ... the price is life itself: it is always the 'dead' letter in which the 'living spirit' must survive“⁴

But she nonetheless insisted that "Acting and speaking men need the help of homo faber in his highest capacity, that is the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all."⁵

It has been interesting for me to discover how, late in his life, Theodor Adorno came to a similar conclusion to that of Arendt, in respect to the difficult matter of reification – and this despite the deep philosophical and personal differences between them. "Humanity", observed Adorno: "includes reification as well as its opposite, not merely as the condition from which liberation is possible, but also positively, as the form in which, however brittle and inadequate it may be, subjective impulses are realized, but only by being objectified."⁶

Thus it seems to me that the failure of the radical hermeneutics associated with Deconstruction to constitute a new architecture, once it had discredited Postmodernism, must give us pause. As Albert Camus observed in another context, even human suffering has to be done 'en mesure'. In conclusion, let me express my hope that the form of mediation that comes to characterize Medium-Architektur will succeed in transcending this difficult historic debate, and will produce a supple intellectual framework in which to foster architecture's most generous cultural possibilities.

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Notes:

- 1 Colloquium concept paper.
- 2 Colloquium concept paper.
- 3 Rem Koolhaas, quoted in the Colloquium concept paper.
- 4 Arendt, Hannah: *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958, p. 169.
- 5 Ibid., p. 173.
- 6 Adorno, Theodor: *Aldous Huxley and Utopia* in: *Prisms*, Cambridge/Mass. 1982, p. 106.